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DRUG CONTROL

U.S. Counterdrug Activities in  
Central America

Statement of Benjamin F. Nelson, Associate Director,  
International Affairs Issues, National Security and International  
Affairs Division

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the results of our review on drug trafficking in Central America.<sup>1</sup> Our work, which was conducted at the request of this Subcommittee, focused primarily on (1) U.S. efforts to curb the flow of cocaine to the United States and the obstacles to those efforts, and (2) the capabilities of Central American countries to interdict cocaine shipments and their dependence on U.S. assistance.

Strategically located between the United States and the cocaine producing countries of South America, Central America and its coastline are used by drug traffickers to facilitate cocaine transshipment to Mexico and onward to the United States. The U.S. Customs Service estimates that two-thirds of all cocaine entering the United States crosses the U.S.-Mexican land border where concealment in cargo is the preferred method of operation. Although the amount of cocaine that transits Central America is not known, the Department of State estimates that as much as 70 tons of cocaine annually transits Guatemala, the country which is the focus of U.S. interdiction efforts in the region. The United States, in 1993, programmed about \$56.5 million to curb the flow of drugs in the Central American region. Of this total, over \$48 million was for U.S. directed interdiction efforts.

#### RESULTS IN BRIEF

Despite various U.S. government interdiction efforts, Central America continues to be a major transshipment point for cocaine shipments to the United States. Available evidence suggests that the supply of drugs entering the United States via Central America remains virtually uninterrupted.<sup>2</sup> Drug traffickers have adjusted their modes of operations to evade U.S. air

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<sup>1</sup>Drug Control: Interdiction Efforts in Central America Have Had Little Impact on the Flow of Drugs (GAO/NSIAD-94-233, Aug. 2, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>Drug Control: Impact of DOD's Detection and Monitoring on Cocaine Flow (GAO/NSIAD-91-297, Sept. 19, 1991); Drug Control: Heavy Investment in Military Surveillance Is Not Paying Off (GAO/NSIAD-93-220, Sept. 1, 1993); and Drug Control: Expanded Military Surveillance Not Justified by Measured Goals or Results (GAO/T-NSIAD-94-14, Oct. 5, 1993).

interdiction efforts and are increasingly using sea and land transportation to move drugs through Central America and on to the United States.

U.S. efforts to control the flow of narcotics have centered on intercepting drug trafficking aircraft transiting the region and seizing drugs destined for the United States. The primary effort has been Operation Cadence, a program combining the efforts of various U.S. government agencies with interdiction operations conducted by Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Central American police personnel. Initiated in 1991, Operation Cadence involves the deployment of specially trained U.S. law enforcement agents to Guatemala who, working on information and intelligence developed by DEA, Department of Defense (DOD), and the U.S. Customs Service, attempt to seize trafficking aircraft and their cargos.

According to DEA, Operation Cadence has been responsible for seizing almost 29 metric tons of cocaine since its inception. However, annual Cadence cocaine seizures have declined. The number of detected flights to the seven countries of Central America fell from 84 in 1992 to 25 in 1993. Suspected trafficking flights into Guatemala fell from 57 in 1992 to 13 in 1993. As a result of Operation Cadence's ability to successfully seize a growing percent of those aircraft choosing to land in Guatemala and six consecutive successful interdiction operations during the June to September 1993 period, traffickers have avoided Guatemala and no suspected trafficking flights have been detected entering the country between October 1993 and March of this year.

Operation Cadence achievements, however, have had little impact on the flow of drugs to the United States. This is because traffickers have changed to different modes of transportation that are much more difficult to identify and stop. For example, traffickers are increasingly using over-land and over-sea air drops to deliver cocaine to Central America. Traffickers are also said to be changing their routes to avoid radar assets on the northern coast of South America. A DEA official involved in Operation Cadence told us that traffickers are believed to be flying small aircraft into the jungle area that separates Colombia and Panama, trucking drug cargoes across Panama, and reloading the drugs on small aircraft that mix with legitimate air traffic in the region. In addition, DEA reports indicate that maritime vessels and air cargo containers are now responsible for the bulk of the cocaine being moved into Central America and much of the cocaine being smuggled into

the United States. The use of ships and boats allows cocaine to be transported in greater bulk and more easily concealed--increasing the difficulty of detection when commingled with legitimate cargo.

The large volume of vehicular traffic crossing into Mexico from Central America also provides traffickers with ample smuggling opportunities. Once into Mexico, whether by air, boat, or land, the drugs are usually destined for the United States. Almost 6,600 tractor trailer trucks and 211,000 passenger vehicles cross the U.S.-Mexican border each day making drug shipments difficult to detect.

The Central American nations through which these drugs travel have neither the resources nor the institutional capability to address the new drug trafficking modes and are heavily dependent on U.S. assistance. Various U.S. government agencies are working with Central American countries on a number of small-scale projects to address new trafficking modes. However, the outcome of these efforts is uncertain due to the limited host country capabilities and changes in U.S. program emphasis from drug interdiction in the transit countries of Central America to intercepting drugs in the source countries of South America.

#### U.S. AGENCIES' EFFORTS TO CONTROL DRUG TRAFFIC FACE OBSTACLES

For fiscal year 1993, State, DEA, DOD, and the U.S. Customs Service programmed over \$48 million to support Operation Cadence and other interdiction activities in Central America. This expenditure primarily represents the cost of U.S. personnel and services and the operation of U.S.-owned radar and aircraft. Using various land-, sea-, and air-based radar, DOD programmed \$24.7 million on detecting and monitoring drug-trafficking aircraft as they left South America and approached the Central American isthmus. The U.S. Customs Service spent at least \$9 million to monitor suspect trafficking aircraft and track them in Central American airspace. The Department of State budgeted \$6.1 million to operate and maintain aircraft used to transport Cadence personnel to aircraft landing sites and \$1 million to train and support Guatemalan police personnel involved in interdiction operations. DEA spent \$828,000 to support the deployment of Operation Cadence teams to the region and \$6.5 million to operate its offices in six Central American countries.

In addition to supporting Operation Cadence, the Department of State programmed almost \$8 million to improve the drug interdiction capabilities of six Central American nations; support drug eradication efforts; and inform Central American citizens about the adverse impacts of drug production, trafficking, and abuse.

#### Obstacles to Successful Interdiction Operations

In addition to problems inherent in identifying and interdicting drug traffickers, U.S. efforts in Central America face a number of other obstacles, some of which involve national sovereignty and jurisdictional issues. For example, Operation Cadence activities in Belize were suspended for about a year because the government of Belize prohibited the entrance of Cadence personnel armed with M-16 rifles. Belize continues to prohibit Department of State helicopters armed with M-60 machine guns from flying over Belize. Similarly, the government of Honduras does not allow Guatemalan aircraft or personnel to fly over its territory.<sup>3</sup> According to one State Department official, regional suspicions have also inhibited joint training and adversely affected joint drug interdiction operations.

At a 1993 conference, Central American presidents discussed greater anti-drug cooperation and pledged their commitment to develop specific regional counterdrug programs within 6 months. To date, however, none of the actions approved at the presidents' conference have been initiated.

#### INTERDICTION CAPABILITIES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRIES ARE SEVERELY LIMITED AND HIGHLY DEPENDENT ON U.S. ASSISTANCE

Although all of the Central American countries--Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama--have drug control efforts underway, no country possesses the technical, financial, or human resources necessary to run an efficient drug interdiction program. In addition, none of the countries has an organization in place to effectively

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<sup>3</sup>Department of State helicopters used in Operation Cadence are operated and maintained by a U.S. government contractor, which employs Guatemalan civilian pilots. Also, Cadence interdiction teams include a number of host nation law enforcement personnel who are restricted to operations within their country.

counter the overland or maritime drug movement. The limited interdiction efforts that they do undertake face obstacles and are highly dependent on U.S. assistance.

#### Limited Capabilities and Obstacles

None of the Central American countries have the resources necessary to purchase sophisticated equipment and develop well-trained personnel to combat the well-financed, creative, and highly adaptable drug traffickers. No Central American nation has a navy or coast guard capable of adequately patrolling all of its territorial waters. For example, four Honduran Navy ships are responsible for patrolling that country's 400 mile Caribbean coast. At the time of our field visit, three of these ships were in dry dock, and Honduras, for a long period of time, could not afford fuel for the fourth ship.

Programs specifically dedicated to counternarcotics activities suffer from inadequate funding. In Honduras, for example, anti-drug police officers earn as little as \$60 a month.

Corruption also limits the effectiveness of Central American governments' narcotics control efforts. In its 1993 and 1994 reports to Congress on the international narcotics control strategy, State reported concerns of narcotics-related corruption in all seven countries of Central America.

#### Funding for U.S. Narcotics Control Activities Is Declining

As a result of budgetary constraints and concern over the effectiveness of State's narcotics control program, Congress reduced the funds available for this worldwide program from \$147.8 million to \$100 million in fiscal year 1994. During fiscal year 1993, the United States provided a combined total of \$5 million in narcotics control assistance to six of the seven Central American countries. Current plans are to provide these countries with \$3 million during fiscal year 1994.

To accommodate reduced funding level in Central America, State Department terminated the deployment of an interdiction/eradication helicopter to Belize, reduced the number of helicopters it had deployed to Guatemala, and greatly reduced the number of flying hours available to support Operation Cadence interdiction activities. This reduced level of

aviation support has adversely affected interdiction efforts, since DEA has had to reduce the number of Operation Cadence teams in Guatemala.

In February 1994, the White House released the new national drug control strategy, which changed the focus from interdicting drug shipments in the transit zone toward stopping the flow of drugs at their source. Along with the shift in emphasis, the strategy clearly envisions a reduced role for DOD and its detecting and monitoring assets in the transit zones. The impact of this strategy shift is not yet clear.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my statement. I will be happy to answer any questions you or members of the Subcommittee have.

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